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ABSTRACT

Parents and teachers share responsibility for creating a working relationship that fosters children's learning. This digest examines the cultural context for parent-teacher relationships, suggests some general strategies for creating a climate in which misunderstandings and disagreements between parents and teachers can be minimized through communication, and discusses some general principles for parents and teachers in dealing with disagreements as they arise. It is important for teachers and parents to remember that they know the child in different contexts, and that each may be unaware of what the child is like in the other context. It is also important for teachers and parents to remember that the foundation for good parent-teacher relationships is frequent and open communication and that both teachers and parents share the responsibility for creating such a foundation. There are several strategies teachers can use to establish a climate conducive to open communication. Teachers can: (1) let parents know how and when they can contact the school and the teacher; (2) practice an open-door, open-mind policy; (3) elicit expressions of parents' concerns and interests in preparation for parent-teacher conferences; and (4) involve parents in classroom activities. Parents also have an important role to play in fostering open communication between themselves and teachers. They can: (1) introduce themselves; (2) be involved in classroom and school activities; and (3) initiate regular contact. On those inevitable occasions when parents and teachers disagree, teachers should: (1) know the school policy for addressing parent-teacher disagreements; and (2) use discretion about when and where children and their families are discussed. Parents can: (1) talk directly with the teacher about the problem; (2) avoid criticizing teachers in front of children; and (3) choose an appropriate time and place to discuss the disagreement. (LPP)

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Preventing and Resolving Parent-Teacher Differences

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Parents and teachers share responsibility for creating a working relationship that fosters children's learning. This digest examines the cultural context for parent-teacher relationships, suggests some general strategies for creating a climate in which misunderstandings and disagreements between parents and teachers can be minimized through communication, and discusses some general principles for parents and teachers in dealing with misunderstandings or disagreements as they arise.

The Cultural Context for Parent-Teacher Relationships

It is important for teachers and parents to remember that they know the child in different contexts, and that each may be unaware of what the child is like in the other context. It is also useful to keep in mind generally that different people often have distinct but disparate perspectives on the same issue.

For many parents, a fundamental part of the parenting role is to be their child's strongest advocate with the teacher and the school (Katz, 1995). Other parents, however, may be reluctant to express their concerns because of cultural beliefs related to the authoritative position of the teacher. Others may have difficulty talking with teachers as a result of memories of their own school years, or they may be unsure of how to express their concerns to teachers. A few parents may fear that questions or criticism will put their child at a disadvantage in school.

Many parents may be surprised to learn that teachers, especially new teachers, are sometimes equally anxious about encounters with parents. Most teachers have received very little training in fostering parent-teacher relationships, but with the growing understanding of the importance of parent involvement, they may worry about doing everything they can to encourage parents to feel welcome (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

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Avoiding Conflicts between Parents and Teachers through Open, Ongoing Communication

The foundation for good parent-teacher relationships is frequent and open communication. Both teachers and parents share the responsibility for creating such a foundation. There are several strategies teachers can use to establish a climate conducive to open communication. Teachers can:

Let parents know how and when they can contact the school and the teacher. As early in the school year as possible, teachers can explain that: (1) they can be reached at specific times or in specific ways; (2) they can be contacted directly as questions or concerns arise; and (3) they have given a lot of thought to their teaching philosophy, class rules, and expectations. In addition to personal interaction, teachers often use newsletters or letters home to provide this information to parents, perhaps including a phone number and, if available, an electronic mail address by which they can be contacted (Barnett, 1995). Some teachers encourage two-way communication by including in newsletters or letters home a short survey about children's interests or parents' hopes or expectations for the school year.

Practice an open-door, open-mind policy. Teachers can invite parents to visit the class at any time that is convenient to the parent. When they visit, parents can monitor their child's perceptions of a situation and see for themselves what the teacher is trying to achieve with his or her students.

Elicit expressions of parents' concerns and interests in preparation for parent-teacher conferences. Some schools organize parent-teacher meetings to discuss their goals early in the school year. On these occasions, teachers can ask parents to share their main concerns and goals for their child. Brief questionnaires and interest surveys also provide good bases for meaningful discussions in parent-teacher conferences (Nielsen & Finkelstein, 1993).

Involve parents in classroom activities. Teachers can let parents know how they can be helpful and solicit parents' assistance with specific activities. The more involved parents are in what goes on in the classroom, the more likely they are to understand the teacher's goals and practices.

Parents also have an important role to play in fostering open communication between themselves and teachers. They can:

Introduce themselves. At the beginning of the school year, parents can contact teachers and let them know when they can be reached most easily, daytime or evening, to discuss their child's classroom experience, and how they would prefer to be contacted (telephone, email, letter, etc.).

Be involved in classroom and school activities at whatever level work and family responsibilities allow. If parents cannot volunteer or go on field trips, they can let the teacher know that they are interested in helping in other ways—with a special display or some activity that can be done on an occasional weekend, for example. They can let the teacher know that they have skills that they would be willing to share even if they are not sure how they can be useful in the classroom. Or, they can let the teacher know that special circumstances (an extremely ill parent, or an especially

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demanding job, for example) prevent them from being formally involved, but that they are always interested in how their child is doing and would welcome communications about their child on a regular basis, not just when there's a problem.

Initiate regular contact. Parents need not wait for the teacher to call them; they can contact the teacher at times the teacher has indicated are convenient.

When Parents and Teachers Disagree: Strategies for Teachers and Parents

On those inevitable occasions when parents and teachers disagree about curriculum, assignments, peer relationships, homework, or teaching approaches, a pattern of open communication can be invaluable for resolving differences (Willis, 1995). But dealing with direct disagreements also requires *respect* and *discretion* by both parents and teachers.

In times of disagreement, teachers should:

Know the school policy for addressing parent-teacher disagreements. It is a good idea for teachers to check school and district policies for handling conflicts or disagreements with parents and to follow the procedures outlined in the policies.

Use discretion about when and where children and their families are discussed. It is important to resist the frequent temptations to discuss individual children and their families in inappropriate public and social situations or to discuss particular children with the parents of other children. Confidentiality contributes to maintaining trust between parents and teachers.

Parents' discussions of disagreements with teachers need to be based on knowing the facts. Parents can:

Talk directly with the teacher about the problem. The best approach is to address complaints at first directly to the teacher, either in person or by telephone, and then to other school personnel in the order specified by school policy. Sometimes the teacher is unaware of the child's difficulty or perception of a situation. Sometimes a child misunderstands a teacher's intentions, or the teacher is unaware of the child's confusion about a rule or an assignment. It is important to check the facts directly with the teacher before drawing conclusions or allocating blame. Direct contact is necessary to define the problem accurately and to develop an agreement about how best to proceed.

Avoid criticizing teachers in front of children. Criticizing teachers and schools in front of children may confuse them. Even very young children can pick up disdain or frustration that parents express about their children's school experiences. In the case of the youngest children, it is not unusual for them to attribute heroic qualities to their teachers. Some even think that the teacher lives at school and thinks of no one but them! Eventually such naivete is outgrown, but overheard criticism is likely to be confusing in the early years and may put a child in a bind over divided loyalties. Besides causing confusion and conflict, criticizing the teacher in front of the child does nothing to address the problem. In the case of older children, such criticism may foster arrogance, defiance, and rudeness toward teachers. Children's respect for authority figures is generally a shared goal in most cultures (Katz, 1996).

Choose an appropriate time and place to discuss the disagreement. Parents should keep in mind that the end of the day, when both teachers and parents are tired, is probably not the best time for a discussion involving strong feelings. If an extended discussion is needed, make an appointment with the teacher.

As children grow older, they are generally aware when their parents are upset about the teacher or a school-related problem. As parents discuss these incidents with their children, they are modeling ways to express frustration with the problems of life in group settings. As children observe and then practice these skills, the coping skills become "tools" in a child's "psychological pocket" to be used in future life experiences.

Conclusion

Teachers and parents share responsibility for the education and socialization of children. Preventing and resolving the differences that may arise between parents, teachers, and children with constructive communication, respect, grace, and good humor can help make school a pleasant place.

For More Information

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